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Senate Republicans introduce legislation to create Great Lakes Aquatic Nuisance Species Coalition

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LANSING – A Senate Republican proposal to create a multi-state coalition to battle aquatic nuisance species was unveiled today in Grand Rapids.

Sen. Patty Birkholz's legislation would authorize the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to enter into an agreement with other Great Lakes basin states to create the Great Lakes Aquatic Nuisance Coalition. The coalition will be charged with eliminating biological pollution in the Great Lakes.

"Aquatic nuisance species are a major threat to the ecosystem of the Great Lakes and they need to be stopped before they wipe out the native fish and wildlife," said Birkholz, R-Saugatuck Township. "We are creating this coalition to start dealing with the problem ourselves instead of waiting for the EPA to start enforcing the regulations."

Birkholz said she plans to introduce the legislation later this week.

The coalition's regulatory authority would stem from each individual state's current water pollution laws and would put in place a basin-wide inspection and enforcement regimen. The inspection and enforcement program would be funded by a grant from the regional Great Lakes Protection Fund. It would specifically enable each state's respective water pollution enforcement agency to participate in the regional regulation of ballast water from ocean-going vessels entering Great Lakes ports and harbors.

"Senate Republicans have long been leaders in the struggle against attacks on the Great Lakes," said Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming. "We created the Great Lakes Conservation Task Force, in part, to seek out threats and find ways to address them effectively. Protecting this tremendous natural resource for generations to come is vital not just to Michigan but to the nation."

There are currently 162 aquatic nuisance species in the Great Lakes, including the sea lamprey, zebra mussel, spiny water flea and Eurasian ruffe. A new species is discovered every eight months.

Aquatic nuisance species are commonly introduced to the Great Lakes through ballast water discharge from ocean-going vessels. Although laws are in place to prevent ballast water dumping, certain exemptions in the Clean Water Act are still allowing this harmful practice to continue, allowing more and more biological pollution in the Great Lakes.